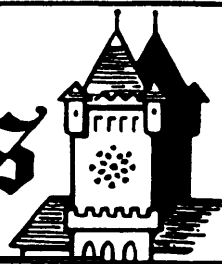


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THE THREE FACES OF PROTESTANTISM

by James B. Jordan

It is commonplace nowadays to say that the protestant Reformation had two branches. These are called the "magisterial" and the "anabaptist" branches. What is meant by this is that some of the Reformers (the "magisterial" ones) looked to the newly emergent nation states of Europe to promote the Reformation against the Catholic Church, while others (the anabaptists) were opposed to the state as well as to the Roman Church.

This way of looking at the Reformation sees it in terms of Church-state relations. Some Reformers wanted to put the Church under the state, while others wanted to drop out of society. Because the issue of Church-state relations is so important in our own time, we should consider whether or not these are the only two options available to us.

In fact, this model of the Reformation is not correct, and is very misleading. From an anabaptist perspective (which is more and more common nowadays), it might be useful to divide the Reformers into "anabaptists and everyone else," but looking at the problem historically, such a perspective is of little value.

In fact, there were three major trends in the protestant reformation, if we look at it in terms of "sociology." It is the purpose of this all-too-brief essay to set out these three trends, and to show why it is important for the Church today to reflect on this matter.

The three faces of Protestantism were, and are, the imperial or nationalistic face, the sectarian or drop-out face, and the catholic face. The Reformers can fairly easily, though roughly, be divided into these three groups. There were drop-out anabaptists; there were those who looked to the state for reformation; and there were those who sought to reform the Church in a catholic manner, apart from the state. In brief, the Lutherans and the Anglicans tended to be magisterial in their approach, setting the prince or the king over against the Pope of Rome. Calvin and Bucer, along with some of the other Swiss Reformers, focussed more on a reformation of the Catholic church, and avoided nationalism.

These three faces of the Protestant movement were not new in the Church; rather, they continued trends which had their origin much earlier in history. Let us, then, briefly survey the history of Church-state relations in the Middle Ages.

Church and State in the Middle Ages

As our first guide, we shall use Brian Tierney's valuable book, *The Crisis of Church and State, 7050-1300* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964). Tierney begins by pointing out that in pagan cultures, society is ruled by a king who is also the chief priest of the people. Social order cannot be

maintained by sheer force, so "the most common solution has been to endow the ruler who controls the physical apparatus of state coercion with a sacral role also as head and symbol of the people's religion" (p. 1). Christianity, however, shattered this unity, and Tierney comments, "The very existence of two power structures competing for men's allegiance instead of only one compelling obedience greatly enhanced the possibilities for human freedom" (p. 2).

When Christianity invaded Europe, the customary social arrangement was that of paganism, with a priest-king at the head of society. The Church claimed, however, that there were two powers on earth, and that Christ had committed to the state the power of the sword, and to the Church the power of the sacraments (excommunication). As Ambrose of Milan put it, "Palaces belong to the emperor, churches to the priesthood." And when summoned to appear before an imperial council, Ambrose said, "Where matters of faith are concerned it is the custom for bishops to judge Christian emperors, not for Emperors to judge bishops" (p. 9). In fact, "in 390, Ambrose went so far as to excommunicate the emperor Theodosius himself, and Theodosius eventually acknowledged his faults and performed a public penance in the cathedral of Milan before being readmitted to communion" (p. 9). Later on, this same type of battle had to be fought with the rulers of the tribes of northern Europe.

It became very easy, during the Middle Ages, for the rulers of northern Europe to pretend that the issue was not Church and state, but rather a cultural battle between southern and northern Europe. The Pope rules in Italy, they maintained, and he wants to bring us under his yoke as well. By stirring up hatred for the Papal court, the kings of Europe concealed their real motive, which was to dominate the Church in their lands.

During the distressing years after the death of Charlemagne and the rise of the civilization of the high middle ages, the traditional pagan culture of northern Europe made many inroads into dominating the Church. "All previously established institutions suffered, not least the church. In every part of Europe ecclesiastical lands and offices fell under the control of lay lords" (p. 24). It was easy for the civil powers to point out the crimes of the clergy, real or invented, as a pretext for taking over the Churches (while the civil rulers themselves lived even more wicked lives).

Gradually, both Church and state recovered from the years of turmoil, and right away there was a tremendous conflict over who would control the Churches of northern Europe. The conflict reached its first climax in the battle between Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII. "Henry could not give up the right of appointing bishops without abandoning all hope of welding Germany into a united monarchy" (P. 45). In

other words, it was a purely statist goal which led the imperial forces to try to control the Church. After all, why on earth should Germany be united as one big powerful state? The existing confederacy could join hands to repel invaders, so it was just plain statism which motivated the Imperial court's opposition to "Rome" and "Papacy." Imperial theologians defended the right of the king to rule the Church, while Church theologians argued for the integrity of Church government, and the separation of Church and state.

During all these centuries there were scores of drop-out movements. Some of these remained within the Church, but argued that the Church should avoid the "world" and especially that the Church should "follow Christ's example and live in poverty." The imperial theologians found it very convenient to support the theology of the sects, for an impoverished and powerless Church was exactly what the kings of northern Europe wanted. They wanted no earthly institution to compete with their own. (The drama of these three forces: catholic, imperial, and sectarian is described cogently in the recent celebrated novel by Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*—a fascinating book.)

In the later Middle Ages, unfortunately, the Papacy came to function more and more like an imperial monarchy. The ideal had always been a universal, catholic Church with its headquarters in Rome. It was harder and harder for people to believe in this vision when the Papacy was acting more and more like a state in itself. Naturally, the imperial and statist thinkers of the North (and in Italy, too) took every opportunity to point out Roman inconsistencies, and to maintain that their struggle was not with the "pure" Church but with the Papal perversion of it.

Ernst Kantorowicz has described the shift in catholic thought which accompanied the drift into Papal statism (*The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theory* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957], pp. 193ff.). In the early Church and in the early Middle Ages, the *corpus mysticum* or "mystical Body" was the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, around which the Church was gathered. The center of the Church's earthly dominion was the sacrament, which she administered in Christ's name. Christ was the head of the Church, and He made Himself present and active through proclamation and sacrament. The Church's earthly power was the power to excommunicate from Christ. The Church was *corpus Christi*, the body of Christ, centered around His mystical body.

The first shift away from this early and biblical way of thinking came when the term *corpus mysticum* (mystical body) came to be used for the Church instead of for the sacrament. In a subtle kind of way, the transcendent power which created the Church came to be identified with the Church herself. Instead of being dependent upon the mystical body of Christ for her life, the Church began to see herself (partly) as the mystical body of Christ. This terminological shift by itself would not seem to mean very much, but the mass of ideas and associations that went along with it were powerful. The Church began to hold what I call a "deposit" view of grace, the idea that grace has been deposited in the Church and the Church manages and dispenses grace. This "deposit" view of grace works against a "receptionist" view, which says that the Church is nothing in herself, and must get everything from her Lord. Back when *corpus mysticum* referred to the sacrament, the Church clearly knew that she got everything she had from Christ; now, however, it seemed that the Church had power in her own right. Indeed, for some the sacrament got its efficacy from the Church—a reversal of the true order.

The second and final shift came when the phrase "mystical body of Christ" began to give way to "mystical body of the Church." Of course, theologians such as Aquinas did not stop talking about the sacrament and how Christ creates the

Church; nor did they stop speaking of the Church as the mystical body of Christ. The shift was this: The political aspect of the Church was separated off, to a great extent, from the sacraments. The political aspect of the church, the "mystical body of the Church," was centered on the Pope as its political, earthly head. Because these ideas are strange to us, putting it simplistically may be of help—so think of it this way: The "spiritual" Church is the body of Christ gathered around the Eucharist; but the "earthly" political Church is a political body gathered around the Pope. Thus Papal theologians could say, "the Church compares with a political congregation of men, and the pope is like to a king in his realm on account of his plenitude of power" (Kantorowicz, p. 203). As Kantorowicz goes on to say, "it was a long way from the liturgy and the sacramental corpus *mysticum* to the mystical polity headed by the Pope" (p. 205).

Thus, the "international" catholic Church began indeed to take upon itself the trappings of a civil empire. And at the same time "the secular state itself—starting, as it were, from the opposite end—strove for its own exaltation and quasi-religious glorification" (p. 207). Thus, imperial thinkers began to speak of the *corpus reipublicae mysticum*, the "mystical body of the commonwealth." This mystical body of the state was gathered into the person of the King, just as the (political) mystical body of the Church was gathered into the person of the Pope.

The result, at the end of the Middle Ages, was that there were two statist orders in competition with one another. There was the largely statist order of the Papal Monarchy, which also controlled the Church catholic, and there were the statist orders of the kings of Northern Europe, who claimed religious prerogatives. Into this mess came the Protestant Reformation.

The Reformation

Luther provided a convenient way for the princes of Germany to do what they had always wanted to do: take over the visible power of the Church. Luther so stressed the personal and charismatic aspect of the gospel, over against the institutional side, that his movement fitted nicely with the designs of the princes. At the same time, from a political point of view, Luther and his followers needed the protection of "godly princes" in order to protect them from Papal threats.

Conflicts in Germany over the reformation eventually led to the formulation *cuius regio, eius religio*: whoever reigns, his religion. The faith of a given region would be determined by the religion of the ruling prince. At this point, Lutheranism in Germany had become pretty much wholly statist in character, in terms of any real independent power for the church. Lutheran acquiescence in the power of the state has continued to be a problem for Christianity in Germany down to the present day, and accounts for the passivity of the Lutheran churches in the face of Nazism.

Another magisterial reformation took place in England. Everybody knows that Henry VIII had less than pure motives in "reforming" the English church. It is noteworthy that the first "reforming" act of the new church was the elimination of two feast days from the Medieval calendar: the feast of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, and the day observed to memorialize the public penance performed by Henry II, who was responsible for Becket's death. Becket had stood against the power of the state, and for the integrity of Church government. The magisterial reformation in England clearly set its face against any true Church government.

In spite of Cranmer's greatness in so many other areas, the great flaw in his thinking lay just in this area: He was thoroughly committed to the idea that the king should rule over the Church. A church which is completely tied in with political authorities is a church which cannot exercise any

kind of discipline. And of course, to this day one of the hallmarks of Anglicanism and Episcopalianism is that virtually no one is ever excommunicated from it.

If these two major branches of the Reformation fell into the trap of statism, so that religion became little more than a department of state, the Swiss reformers Calvin and Bucer did not. Once again, these reformers needed the protection of the Swiss cities against the Papacy, but they insisted on and strove for the integrity of separate Church government. In this respect, Calvin and Bucer and their associates sought to transcend the war of the two imperial forces, and create a Reformed Catholic Church in Europe.

It is for this reason that Bucer especially spent himself in one meeting after another, colloquy upon colloquy, with Anabaptists, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics, striving to prevent the splitting and fragmentation of Christ's Church. One, holy, catholic, "international" Church was the dream of Bucer and of Calvin, but it was not to be. Thus, there are no Churches named for Bucer or for Calvin, for their work and thought has gone out into the Church catholic at large.

G. S. M. Walker's comments on Calvin are most appropriate: "Catholicism and Calvinism, according to Hume Brown (*John Knox*, 1895), are the only two absolute types of Christianity. It would be more accurate to say that there are two types of catholicity, one Roman, one Reformed. They stand in fundamental opposition because of a certain fundamental likeness, for Geneva offered to Rome an alternative which was ultimate and in itself complete. A partial synthesis was indeed achieved by Canterbury, but at the price of creating parties which finally sundered the religious unity of England. And the Anglican genius is rather of the Byzantine type; primarily a way of worship, *orthodoxia*, it can become almost a department of the state. Calvin stood closer to the Latin tradition of churchmanship, and on the formal basis of *so/a Scriptura*, he sought to realize at least some ideals of the great medieval popes." ("Calvin and the Church," from McKim, ed., *Readings in Calvin's Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984], p. 230.)

An example of how the catholic Reformed viewpoint was co-opted by northern European statism is the history of the Heidelberg Catechism. The original version of the Catechism does not contain the present Question 80, condemning the Mass. At the insistence of the political authorities, Q. 80 was added, setting out the difference between the Roman mass and the Reformed view of the Lord's Supper. Not satisfied, the political authorities demanded a third edition, which called the mass an "accursed idolatry." It should be obvious that the religious leaders of the Reformation were still hoping for a catholic reformation, but the political leaders were looking for a tool to use in their political struggle against the Papal monarchy.

How convenient it is to insist that the Papacy is "the man of sin, the antichrist" and so forth—convenient for the statist! It is politically useful to programme people into thinking that an "international" catholic church is evil, and that nationalistic churches are good. Like the imperials of the middle ages, the princes of early modern Europe were interested in only two kinds of churches: ones they could run, or drop-out sects which were no threat to them. The greatest danger, after the Roman Catholic church, was a Reformed Catholic church. Such was the very last thing they wanted!

Post-Reformation Developments

Because of the failure of the Reformed Catholic movement of Bucer and Calvin, protestantism was very quickly identified with nationalism. The war to free the Netherlands from Spain was all tied up with the conflict between Reformational and Roman Catholic theology. The struggle of Scotland to maintain independence from England was all mixed up with theological and ecclesiastical concerns. Instead of one international catholic church, the protestant

churches came to be nationalistic churches, and the result was low morals and a low spiritual life. Baalism (religious nationalism) seemed to be engulfing the Reform.

As it happened, there were reactions against this. In Germany, the "Pietist" movement arose to protest the dead orthodoxy of statist religion. In England, the "Puritan" movement did the same. Anglican liturgist and theologian Dom Gregory Dix has this penetrating remark to make about the Puritans: "The incipient presbyterian and congregationalist movements under Cartwright and Browne did express, however awkwardly and inadequately, a desire for a less bureaucratic and above all a more religious organisation and life of the church *qua* church. They had a real sense that the church is not, and ought not to appear, a department of the state but a divine society with a supernatural life of its own. In their own ways they were 'high church' movements" (*The Shape of the Liturgy* [Westminster, England: Dacre Press, 1945], p. 684).

In short, to some extent, the Puritan movement was a catholic movement, away from northern European statism, and toward the historic Medieval church tradition. Sadly, Puritanism was also largely a sectarian movement, ignoring the history and development of the Church, and shooting for "New Testament" ideals while generally overlooking the wisdom of the historic Church. In this respect, Puritanism was no heir of Calvin and Bucer. For protestantism by this time had come to associate "catholic" with "Papal," and the abuses of the late medieval papacy at that. The ideals of Bucer and Calvin were lost in a sea of reaction. The early Puritans still retained much of the vision of the "Reformed Catholics: but their later heirs were mostly sectaries in their thought.

This is as good a place as any to point out that catholic, nationalistic, and sectarian tendencies can be found in any of the churches of the Reformation. Except for extreme Anabaptist sectaries and extreme Erastian nationalists, all three faces of protestantism can be found within any particular church in any land. What we can notice, however, is that in protestantism as a whole, the catholic impulse tends to be lost in a battle between sectarian and nationalistic tendencies. In both Scotland and in Holland, for instance, there were numerous church splits, yet each little splinter group maintained that it was the true national church, and thus entitled to receive a dole from the state!

In protestant lands, it seemed as if Catholicity were impossible. "Catholic" meant bad. The early church was ignored, and the great gains of the medieval period were all viewed as evils "produced by antichrist." Unthinking protestants gave away the governmental power of the Church to the state, and the result was that protestants had only two choices: either the church was ruled by the State, or else the church was a drop-out sect which made no claim to be an alternative government on the earth. The sects emphasized preaching, and the governmental side of the Church disappeared. What protestant church today has law courts, or a law school? Where are the protestant texts on church law? (Charles Hedge wrote one, but it is certainly not in print!) Where are protestant canon lawyers? To ask such questions is to expose the sad truth that the protestant churches have given away the great gains made by the early and medieval churches. The result is rampant statism everywhere.

The Catholic Reformers in Switzerland did not capture the day. Had they won out, there would have been a Reformed Catholic church. There would have been weekly communion, so that the threat of excommunication would have meant something real. There would have been Reformed church courts, with elders and ministers sitting as real judges over matters pertaining to the spiritual government of the Church. The statism which has led to so many wars in Europe over the past several centuries would have been restrained. There would have been no extreme Puritan

movements which threw the baby out with the bathwater in the areas of worship and of church government.

In fact, however, the vision of an international Reformed catholic church died with the first reformers. There was something of a revival of it at the Synod of Dordt, and catholicity has never wholly been absent from protestant thinking, but it has been a weak and minority position.

America

After the War for independence, the various states began to disestablish their churches, and soon there were no established churches in America. The result was that all the churches became sects. A strange thing then happened: Groups of immigrants brought over their churches with them, but where these churches had (often) been nationalistic in the mother country, in the new world they were "denominations." A denomination is nothing but a large sect.

The churches in America have not functioned in any kind of catholic or Biblical fashion as regards government. After all, the government of the Church only exists by recognition, because the Church does not wield a sword to force its will upon anyone. But what happens if a man is excommunicated from a Baptist church? He just goes down the street and joins a Methodist one. The churches do not recognize one another's government. And how convenient this is for empire-building sectarian Churchmen! By despising all the other churches, they can build their own.

The American churches have been afflicted with a curious mixture of nationalism and sectarianism. We have just noted how sectarian they all are, and how they work to despise one another in practice. Let us also for a moment recall just how nationalistic (baalistic) American churches tend to be. Go into most American churches and you will see an American flag displayed down front. What is it doing there? Your guess is as good as mine, but one thing is for sure: It has no business there.

Another simple and obvious illustration comes from the Civil War. Virtually every "denomination" in America split during the war. Why? The Catholic church existed for centuries, through all the wars of Europe, without splitting into various nationalistic churches, but the American churches could not endure one century without splitting along purely nationalistic lines. Frankly, it is disgusting to think about. (I'm not trying to say who was at fault in any situation, I'm just talking about how corrupt the protestant churches have been in this area, due to their basic mentality.)

One of the saddest things in recent years is that the more conservative a protestant group is, the more sectarian it is. Instead of linking conservatism and Biblicism with the historic and catholic posture of the true Church as a whole, each tiny protestant group assumes that it has all the truth, and despises the rest. This is even true within denominations. A man excommunicated from one congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America (in Birmingham) just went down the street and was welcomed at another PCA church. In our town, the presbyterian churches gleefully accept the excommunicated members of other churches, though some are slower to do so now, having paid a rather heavy price for it.

Such is the situation: No mutual recognition; no catholicity; just a bunch of sects warring among themselves. In our town, a group of malcontents left the local PCA church, and immediately another presbyterian denomination took them

in and formed one of their own churches out of them-and these two denominations are at present talking about merger! (And this has happened in town after town, as many of you know.)

Of course, even in America, and even in American presbyterianism there have been those who sought for a more catholic view of the Church. I think, right off the top of my head, of Charles Hedge, who so appreciated the catholic labors of the Reformed thinker and historian Philip Schaff, and who authored his own books on the Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church and on Presbyterian Law. Hedge took a dim view of sectarianism, as he says concerning the "Great Awakening":

"Whitefield far out-did Mr. Tennent, as to this point [ecclesiastical anarchism]. He admitted none of the principles which Mr. Tennent believed, in ordinary times, ought to be held sacred. He assumed the right, in virtue of his ordination, to preach the gospel wherever he had an opportunity, 'even though it should be in a place where officers were already settled, and the gospel was fully and faithfully preached. This, I humbly apprehend,' he adds, 'is every gospel minister's indisputable privilege.' It mattered not whether the pastors who thus fully and faithfully preached the gospel, were willing to consent to the intrusion of the itinerant evangelist or not. 'If pulpits should be shut,' he says, 'blessed be God, the fields are open, and I can go without the camp, bearing the Redeemer's reproach. This I glory in; believing if I suffer for it, I suffer for righteousness' sake.' If Whitefield had the right here claimed, then of course Davenport had it, and so every fanatic and errorist has it. This doctrine is entirely inconsistent with what the Bible teaches of the nature of the pastoral relation, and with every form of ecclesiastical government, episcopal, presbyterian, or congregational. Whatever plausible pretences may be urged in its favor, it has never been acted upon without producing the greatest practical evils." (*Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church*, vol. 2, p. 98.) Hedge has some nicer things to say about Whitefield elsewhere, but his basic catholicity was offended by Whitefield's anarchism.

Conclusion

I must bring this brief essay to a close. The position of Geneva Ministries is that the imperial/nationalistic notion of the Church is gravely wrong, for the Church is not a department of state. We also hold that the sectarian notion is also wrong, for the Church must have an institutional, governmental presence in the world. Part of the calling of the Church is to stand against the monolithic state.

We believe that a vision of a true, catholic Church is needed in America in our time. The Church must recover herself as a government. Local churches must begin recognizing one another's discipline, and this night of anarchy and of undercutting one another must end. Protestants must shake themselves loose from the mindless sectarian stupidity of kneejerk reactions against everything that "smacks of Rome," for we Reformed Catholics are the true heirs of the early Church and of the greatness of the Medieval Church. Conservative protestants must also begin to read the writings of people outside their own immediate circles, for there is much wisdom to be learned from Christian thinkers in other traditions.

This was the vision of the first Geneva, of Bucer and Calvin. It must be our vision today.

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